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THE

PRESBYTERIAN SYSTEM:

ITS

REASONABLENESS AND EXCELLENCY.

BY THE

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THE

PRESBYTERIAN SYSTEM.

NUMEROUS systems of church polity have been devised and adopted for the government of the household of faith. The most of them are, by their advocates, represented as taught or sustained by the Scriptures. These representations cannot all be correct. Some of them are at fault. The very fact of so much variety would seem to indicate a want of precision, in this respect, on the part of the sacred writers. It may be, that a slight diversity of form prevailed among the churches founded by the apostles and their associates, according as the churches were composed of Jews or Gentiles, Greeks or Romans. The circumstances of the people, the peculiarities of the place, the customs of the nation, may have had much to do in determining, if not the kind, yet the minor details, of their ecclesiastical organizations. Such was unquestionably the fact. Much that pertained to form was left to be developed, as always, by a fuller experience of the necessities of the case.

But, if it be admitted that no one form of church government is clearly and undeniably indicated in the written word, are there not principles there inculcated, from which we can gather the system, in whole, or in part, which is best adapted to secure the ends for which the Church of Christ is constituted; the system that is most conformed to the teachings and practices

of the apostles, and most conducive to the healthful growth of the Church in truth and goodness? We are Presbyterians,—an organic body of Christians, professing a common faith, practising a common worship, and submitting to a common form of government. In the good providence of God, the pastors and delegates of our churches assembled in solemn convocation, seventy years ago, and, after full consideration, adopted "a plan of government and discipline" for "the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America;" by which plan, or polity, amended subsequently in some minor particulars, our Church, in the administration of its ecclesiastical affairs, has been governed to the present day. Are the principles by which our fathers were guided in the adoption of our ecclesiastical polity conformed to the general principles of the inspired word, and such as are best adapted to secure the true ends of church government?

What are the main principles of our ecclesiastical polity? They may be grouped in a few particulars.

I. The Unity and Universality of the Church of Christ.

It never entered into the minds of the framers of our constitution to limit the grace of God to their own communion. They had their particular views of theological truth, and differed on many points of faith from their brethren of other denominations. They were ardently attached to their time-honored and simple forms of worship. They had long practised, and fully tested, the order and discipline to which they gave at that time a wider expansion. They greatly preferred these forms to all others. But they had no thought of saying, in the self-righteous language of ancient Israel, "The temple of the Lord—the temple

of the Lord—the temple of the Lord are these!" They regarded themselves and their churches as but a branch of the true vine, but an humble part of the twelve tribes of Israel. They asserted, for their faith and order, no monopoly of gospel grace, no exclusive occupancy of the fold of "the Good Shepherd." Most gladly did they recognise the cheering fact, so beautifully expressed by their Lord, "Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold." They extended, therefore, the fellowship of a common brotherhood to "all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours."

This universal brotherhood they regarded, very properly, in a twofold aspect,—as visible and invisible; as seen, and heard, and known of men; or as seen by the heart-searching God. The former they recognised as embracing the whole body of professed believers; the latter, only such as God knows to be his. They discriminated, by this distinction, between the true and the false, the precious and the vile, the clean and the unclean, the genuine and the counterfeit; according to that scripture, "He is not a Jew which is one outwardly, neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew which is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God."

"The catholic or universal Church which is invisible," they say, "consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ, the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all."* This definition is clearly conformed to the oracles of

* Conf. of Faith, xxv. 1.

divine truth. This is the Church that the Redeemer "purchased with his own blood," "that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water, by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." It comprehends the Church militant and the Church triumphant; all the regenerate that are, and that are to be, on the earth, of all nations, tribes, and kindred; with all the ransomed host in glory. This includes not a few who have been denied a place in the visible Church; and some, too, whom the weakness of their faith, or feebleness of their hope, or the wrath of man, or the want of opportunity, has kept from a profession of the true faith. It excludes a vast number, who, in ignorance, or hypocrisy, or by virtue of their birth and lineage, or by intimidation, have been brought within the pale of an external Christianity. This invisible Church is the true Church, the only one. None but they who have been chosen, called, regenerated, and justified by the Holy Spirit, are, or can be, the children of God and heirs of heaven. All such, however regarded by man, and in whatever ecclesiastical connection they are found, Papist or Protestant, Prelatical or Puritan, belong to this honored brotherhood. Nor can one of them be cut off, or cast out, by any authority or ordinance of man, by excision, exclusion, or excommunication, from "the general assembly and church of the first-born." The hypocrite, the unregenerate, the children of the wicked one, may find, and in all ages have found, their way into the Church visible; into the Church invisible, never.

The Church visible, according to the symbols of our fathers, "is also catholic or universal under the gospel,

not confined to one nation, as before under the law," and "consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, with their children."* As this catholic or universal Church is not limited, as of old, by blood or national affinities, neither is it by territorial or denominational boundaries. All of every name, "in all ages and places of the world," who "profess the true religion," are enfolded within its ample bosom. None are excluded; none may arrogate to themselves the sole occupancy of the house of God. If asked, "Which, the Episcopal or the Presbyterian, is the true Church?" we reply, "Neither:" just as the foot is not the body, as the door is not the house, as a part is not the whole. We find the visible Church wherever "the true religion" is professed. We accord to all professing Christians a place in this lower house, but not the house itself. We meet them all on the broad platform of a common Christianity. No figment of apostolical succession, or of prelatical grace, separates us from other branches of the Church of Christ; nor yet a peculiar administration of one of the ordinances. We know nothing of "close communion." To the sacramental board, the common heritage of the Church, we receive, and welcome with open arms, the whole household of faith. We "believe in the Catholic Church," excluding none who hold the Head. In the highest sense, ours is a catholic polity.

But, in these admissions, we are far from making light of theological differences. Some portions of the visible church partake more of the spirit of the Master, and conform more fully to the truth, than others. "This Catholic Church," we maintain, "hath been sometimes more, sometimes less, visible And par-

* Conf. of Faith, xxv. 2.

ticular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed, more or less purely in them."* "The purest churches under heaven," as we believe, "are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan."† In accordance with these views, we do not hesitate to speak of "the Pope of Rome" as "that antichrist, that man of sin and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the Church against Christ and all that is called God."‡ Our large-hearted charity does not require us to regard the Papacy as the true Church, or even a part of it, nor to recognise the ministers of antichrist as a part of the true ministry. With the most strenuous of the anti-Papal portions of the Church of Christ, we protest against its unfounded claims and unrighteous usurpations. We hold to the Catholic Church, but deny that the Roman, or the Greek, or the Anglican, is, has been, or can be, the one only Church of Christ. We abjure alike the Papal and the Prelatical appropriation of the channels of divine grace. We are Catholics, but not Roman Catholics. We are Presbyterians, but Christians more, "fellow-citizens with the saints" of every name, "and of the household of God."

Our system also recognises,

II. The Subdivision of the Catholic Church into Particular Churches.

The necessity of such a distinction is obvious. "As this immense multitude," who constitute the universal Church, "cannot meet together, in one place, to hold

* Conf. of Faith, xxv. 4. † Conf. of Faith, xxv. 5.
‡ Conf. of Faith, xxv. 6.

communion, or to worship God, it is reasonable, and warranted by Scripture example, that they should be divided into many particular churches."* The ἐκκλησία of the sacred writers, though properly denoting a convocation or assembly, is, at times, to be understood of the whole body of believers. More commonly, however, it is to be received literally, as denoting a particular congregation of real or professing Christians. The Scriptures speak of "the churches of God," "of Christ," "of the saints," "of the Gentiles," "of Judea," "of Asia," "of Galatia," and "of Macedonia;" "the church of Ephesus," "of Smyrna," "of Sardis," and others.

Any number of Christian people "professing the true religion," and meeting statedly for the worship of God and for the administration of Christian ordinances, is a church, whatever may be the peculiarities of their discipline or the mode of their organization. They may be more or less pure in faith and scriptural in worship; more or less conformed, in their ecclesiastical order, to the apostolical model; and yet be entitled to the rights and privileges of a Christian church.

Our Form of Government treats of the "ordinances in a particular church," "regularly constituted with its proper officers;" "of the church session" as the officers "of a particular congregation;" of "a church" "without a pastor," and of the watch to be kept over "the members of the church" by "the church session." It requires, at the installation of officers in a particular congregation, an answer to the question, "Do you, the members of this church, acknowledge and receive this brother," or these brethren? It specifies that candidates for the ministry are to be "regular

* Form of Govt., ii. 3.

members of some particular church;" shows how a bishop is to "be translated from one church to another," and what "any church desiring to call a settled minister" is to do; and says that the installment, in such a case, "consists in constituting a pastoral relation between him and the people of that particular church."* It uses the words "congregation" and "church" indiscriminately, as denoting the particular, or local, association of believers in a covenant relation.

Our system, "as strictly interpreted by its standards," therefore, recognises not only "one comprehensive and general Church," as is right and proper, but, as really and truly as any other system, "the existence of local churches," having all the appropriate functions of a church; with a distinct membership, associated by covenant; with officers chosen by themselves; dependent on no other organization, or "specified order" of individuals beyond and above them, for the administration of the ordinances, for the exercise of internal discipline, and for the management of their particular affairs. Strange as it may seem to those who speak disparagingly of the autonomy of our congregations or churches, and so frequently ring the changes upon "the iron rule of Presbytery," "understanding neither what they say nor whereof they affirm," our Form of Government nowhere specifies the mode of proceeding in the organization of our particular churches; nowhere defines the "antecedent processes" of a regular formation, nor "the members of a specified order" through whom the organization is to be effected; nowhere speaks of any set forms as "essential to their correct and scriptural existence;" but leaves the people to proceed in such a way as their

* Form of Govt., vii., ix., xiii., xiv., xvi.

own judgment may dictate. "A particular church," it says, "consists of a number of professing Christians, with their offspring, voluntarily associated together for divine worship and godly living, agreeably to the Holy Scriptures, and submitting to a certain form of government."* Nothing can be more liberal, or savor less of the rigid rule of sect.

As has been said in praise of a rival system, we may say of our own, "There is no precise law and pattern of organization, which must be adhered to, and a deviation from which invalidates the proceeding. The whole is a matter of free consent and mutual adjustment. Upon the platform of their common faith, the associated disciples, by their agreement with each other, erect their own church organization,—an organization complete within itself, and rightfully independent of every other." Not a word in our Constitution teaches otherwise. The church may call in the aid of one or more of the ministry, or apply to a Presbytery to aid them in their organization; but not necessarily. They may choose to associate with other churches similarly constituted, or not. If they approve "of the government and discipline of the Presbyterian Church in these United States,"† they may be admitted to the fellowship of our churches, and not a word asked as to the antecedent processes of their formation.

To all intents and purposes, theoretically and practically, each of our congregations of believers is a complete church within itself,—as truly so as a Congregational church. "It is," to use the words of another, "a young republic, having its popular assemblies, its delegated representatives, its local tribunal, its independent by-laws, and the entire and exclusive

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* Form of Govt., ii. 4. † Form of Govt., xiii. 4.

management of all matters which are purely local Each congregation is thus a commonwealth, as truly as each synod. It has its own important and independent sphere of action, and is a type of the general government of the whole Church. Here the laity—the people—rule and reign."*

The same necessity of mutual watchfulness, that prompts the individual Christian to associate himself with other Christians by covenant engagements, may prompt the individual church to associate with other churches; but it loses thereby nothing of its prerogatives as a church of Christ. It is none the less a church because it enjoys the orderly fellowship of other similar organizations. It enjoys all the advantages of a Congregational church, and more. It secures, by our system, peculiar privileges. What it loses of independency is of its own preference, and is more than compensated by what it gains.

Advancing upon these principles, we recognise also,

III. An Organized Confederacy of Particular Churches.

The right of any number of similarly-constituted churches to combine and associate together, under specified conditions not involving a sacrifice of principle, for mutual edification and for the advancement of the common interests of truth and godliness, cannot be questioned. If, as claimed by the churches of another denomination, "each local society of believers, having once, by its own act, been constituted as a church, is therefore self-complete, and self-controlling, and rightfully independent of the jurisdiction of others," then, surely, it may determine for itself to

* "Ecclesiastical Republicanism," by Thomas Smyth, p. 81.

form a partnership with others similarly organized. The right of self-control must include the right of forming alliances with others; as in the case of the sexes and the conjugal union; as in the case of mercantile partnerships; or as in the union of political states. If this right be denied to other churches, we claim for our own a higher liberty, a better system of ecclesiastical polity, more complete, and, to say the least, not less scriptural."

Nothing in God's word, whether of precept or practice, denies this right to the local church, or forbids its exercise. Much appears in both to favor it. The Jewish Church was one body. Whatever were the provisions for keeping up the worship of God on the Sabbath, previous to the Captivity, and however extensively synagogues, or churches, were organized subsequently, the people were one, and their Church one. A particular community of Israelites, residents of the same neighborhood, might band together as a קהל, an ἐκκλησία, a congregation, a church; and meet statedly, on the Sabbath and at other times, for the celebration of divine worship; and possess all the elements of completeness as an organized association; yet they did not thereby cease to be part and parcel of that ecclesiastical commonwealth the pattern of which was shown in the holy mount, extending over the whole land of Israel. It formed no part of the divine counsel to institute a system of local organizations, each of which should be rightfully and actually subject to no extraneous control, under law to no higher organization, nor in any sense amenable to other churches, "except as it freely submits to and invites" their counsel on special occasions. The chosen people of God were bound together by the strong bonds of family, kindred, tribe, and a common progenitor, in

the ecclesiastical as well as the political commonwealth.

The first Christian churches were gathered out of the Jewish Church. As followers of Christ, they had been taught by their Lord to look upon themselves as members one of another; that, under the new dispensation, believers were more one than ever; that, instead of being released from the obligation of a visible recognition of brotherhood, a far higher obligation now rested on them, as partakers of divine grace, to give a practical demonstration of their oneness with Christ and with each other. Their inspired teachers urged upon them this specific duty. They illustrated this oneness by a reference, as we have seen, to the human body. They taught, not merely that the individual was one with the members of a local church, as at Philippi or Corinth, but that every local church was itself but an inseparable member of the body of believers, as truly as the hand, or the foot, of the human body; that none were independent of others.

Accordingly, we find them banding together as one, for the promotion of a common cause,—the advancement of the Redeemer's kingdom. They were more in number, even in Jerusalem, than could meet together statedly for the worship of God; and yet they were but one Church, though composed of many congregations. Surrounded by eager foes ever watchful for their destruction, they felt the need of combination, of mutual assistance in every practicable form. Their common interests are made the care of all. Councils or synods are convened, occasionally at first, and then statedly, for advisement and adjudication. They recognise a higher jurisdiction than the brotherhood of a local church. They act on the grand principle that particular congregations, made such by local necessi-

ties, are but parts of one great ecclesiastical commonwealth, embracing all of every name and nation who confess Christ before men. This principle was thus early incorporated into their whole polity, and transmitted to successive generations. It has been adopted, from that day to the present time, by all branches of the visible Church, save the Brownists and Independents, and, it may be, some few fragmentary sects of but little note.

Neither the teaching of Scripture, therefore, nor the practice of the early churches, militates in the slightest degree against the right and privilege, on the part of a particular church of entering, into a permanent confederacy with other churches. It is an inherent right. If deemed expedient in a particular case, country, or communion, it may be exercised. The Great Charter, from which all our churches derive their constitution, favors it. It seems to grow out of the very fundamental principles of the Bible.

The question, then, of an organized confederacy of churches becomes, in a measure, one of expediency. Is it best for the congregations of an extended communion to be thus banded together? Are there important ends to be secured without hazard to Christian liberty, by such an arrangement? If government is needed in the smaller circle, is it not in the larger? If in the family, is it not in the community of families? May every household set itself up to be independent of all others, and every hamlet, village, town, or city make the same demand? Is it thus that well-ordered and prosperous states are constituted and conducted? Man is the same, whether in the Church or the State. The principles applicable to his government in the one are just as applicable in the other. Society, ecclesiastical as well as political, needs to be bound together

by visible joints and bands. Why is it that, not only in monarchical Europe, but also in republican America, and even in democratic New England, the system of confederation pervades the whole body politic? Families of diverse origin, whose lot is cast in the same general vicinity, prompted by a very natural regard for their common welfare, resolve themselves into an organized municipality,—a town, a borough, a city. The several towns of the same locality, in order to guard against encroachment and to provide for mutual interests, assume the form of a *comitatus*, or county; counties become states; and states or commonwealths, a confederated republic, a consolidated nation, a kingdom, an empire.

The necessity of such a system, in order to the peace, the comfort, the freedom, and the progressive development of the human family, in all matters pertaining to the body politic, will not be questioned by the American people. We have no thought of any other system. We are theoretically and practically republicans,—nothing but republicans. The principle is embodied in the Constitution of every one of the States; and particularly in the Constitution of the United States, that "guarantees to every State in this Union a republican form of government."* This great exponent of republicanism, susceptible as it may be of slight amendments, we justly regard as the charter of our rights, the palladium, not of bondage, but of freedom. In the providence of God, it has been the salvation, as it is the glory, of our land. At a period of distrust, depression, and wide-spread bankruptcy, when discord and jealousy pervaded the land, when agricultural, manufacturing, and commercial enterprise

* Art. IV. Sect. 4.

was almost extinguished, and ruin hung like a pall over the country, the fathers met in council and sought a remedy for these impending evils. A government must be devised and inaugurated more stable and efficient than the system of independency then prevailing. What shall it be?

It never entered into the thoughts of the most ultra-democratic of that memorable convention, that the best possible government for the millions of the American people would be a return to the simple forms of the town-meeting; to a system in which every little knot of neighbors, banding together as a municipality, is to be perfectly "independent of the jurisdiction of all others;" "where the influences exerted" by these communities "over one another are moral merely, and not magisterial; where each is held to be free from the control of all the others, free even from any interference on their part, except as it assents to and invites it; where all, in a word, while allied closely by confidence and friendship, by kindred impulses and similar aims, are uncombined in any structure of laws, and therefore, though free to advise, are not at liberty to dictate," the only visible exemplification of fellowship and union being an "occasional call of each upon the others for counsel and advice." This system, the boast of Independency, from one of whose most zealous advocates this description is taken, had in part prevailed too long in the State, and was itself one of the evils under which the country groaned. As a political theory, it could not have been put into practice even where embraced ecclesiastically.

"In order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and

secure the blessings of liberty"* to themselves and their posterity, the people of the United States ordained and established a political Constitution, which to this day has withstood every assault and been the greatest bulwark of political freedom. It has made of numerous sovereign States one united people, binding together their discordant interests, prompting them to consult and labor for the common weal, and giving them character and influence in the household of nations. It has made us, by the blessing of God, a prosperous, powerful, and happy people. It has secured to the individual, and to the humblest of the States, the utmost liberty consistent with safety and strength, guarding them from all encroachment. Well may we prize it, cherish it, cling to it, and plead with the God of nations that it may be perpetual.

The Church, more than the State, is, and should be, one. By virtue of its divine constitution, it is compacted and knit together in the bonds of a holy love Its various portions have common sympathies, relations, and interests. Reason, Scripture, and experience teach that, where the churches of a territory, state, province, or nation have the same or similar views of doctrine, worship, government, and discipline, it is both right and wise to institute or adopt some organized mode of exhibiting and confirming their union; thereby also to secure the rights, privileges, and interests which pertain to them as Christians and churches, and which are ever liable to be brought into jeopardy.

On these principles the framers of our ecclesiastical Constitution acted. They aimed to give embodiment as well as expression to the fellowship of the churches; to deepen the interest of each in the other; to furnish

* Preamble to the "Constitution of the United States of America."

the most ample guarantees of mutual regard; to provide for the denomination a suitable ministry; to preserve them from the encroachments of ignorance, superstition, inordinate ambition, and immorality in the pulpit; to secure the most abundant redress from the injustice of intolerance and bigotry; to guard in the most effectual manner the right of private judgment, and to maintain the unfettered exercise of Christian liberty. They sought to strengthen each others' hearts and hands in the good work of advancing the kingdom of holiness in their own souls, and in the souls of perishing men throughout the land and throughout the world.

These men were staunch republicans and true patriots,—none more so,—true friends of Washington and the American Congress. They had laid their all on the altar of liberty,—perilled every thing in their unwavering opposition to tyranny and oppression. None more heartily and steadily maintained the rights of the people as proclaimed, not in "glittering and sounding generalities," but in "the words of truth and soberness" embodied in the Declaration of Independence. John Witherspoon, the scholar, the senator, and the divine, the friend of freedom and the uncompromising foe of oppression, was the fitting representative of the Presbyterian Church when he appended his name to that national protest. They accepted his act as their own, and stood by him to the end. The men who assembled in the Synod of New York and Philadelphia in 1786 and 1787, by whom our ecclesiastical platform was constructed, had but just come from the scenes of that memorable struggle which gave freedom to the nation. At the very time when the fathers of the Republic were laying the foundations and erecting the superstructure of our political Con-

stitution, the fathers of the Presbyterian Church were accomplishing a similar work for their religious commonwealth.

The period was auspicious. Questions pertaining to the science of human government had excited the utmost attention, had been discussed most freely, and had been deeply pondered, from the earlier stages of the great contest for freedom. The ablest writers of the age were tasking their energies, and contributing to the formation of a healthful public sentiment. Never before, at least on this side of the great sea, had the human mind been so thoroughly roused in relation to human rights. Jealous of their blood-bought liberties, and sensitive to the last degree in the matter of ecclesiastical domination, having but just escaped from the impending visitation of a lordly hierarchy from a foreign shore, they were the last men in the world to impose the yoke of an "iron rule" upon the necks of their brethren. They were laymen as well as clergymen. Genuine haters of popery and prelacy, they could not but favor, and to their utmost promote, the parity of believers, of churches, and of the ministry.

"God alone," they said, "is the Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship." They maintained, therefore, that "the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion," are "universal and unalienable;" and "that, in perfect consistency with" this "principle of common right, every Christian church, or union or association of particular churches, is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion, and the qualifications of its ministers and members, as well as the whole system of its internal government which Christ hath

appointed."* What could be asked for more, even by Independency itself?

The result of their deliberations is embodied in a written Constitution, or form of government, discipline, and worship, conformed in a remarkable degree, as might have been expected, to the political system of our country, as well as to the Scriptures of divine truth; a Constitution in which, while the rights of the individual, and of each particular church, are carefully secured, the unity and the community of the whole brotherhood of believers, and especially of the denomination, are fully recognised and practically illustrated; a Constitution which, for all the important ends of church government and discipline, may well challenge a comparison with any and every other; a Constitution of which we have no need to be ashamed.

Some recognition of the fellowship of the churches, and some responsibility on the part of particular churches one to another, are deemed necessary even among our Independent and Congregational brethren. If we have our Presbyteries, they have their Associations and Consociations, their Councils and Conferences. If we have our Synods, they have their General Conferences, Conventions, and Associations. If we have our General Assembly, they have their Cambridge, Saybrook, and Albany Synods, or Congregational Unions. Their necessities, as well as ours, constrain them to the adoption of these principles.

As individual believers need the watch and care of a confederated Church united by "solemn league and covenant" in one body, so, also, individual churches are to regard themselves as members of the same body, and, by some visible organization, provide for

* Form of Govt., i. 1, 2.

their mutual inspection. As the lone Christian is prone to wander and fall, so is the lone church. The experience of the present and of every past age teaches us, in the words of our Constitution, that "the purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error," and may be "so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan."* If the fall of one professing Christian is an evil to be carefully avoided and prevented, much more the fall of a whole church. Why guard, in ecclesiastical systems, so carefully against the one, and not the other? Why provide an organization in the one instance, and none in the other?

The necessity of making application for the counsel and co-operation of other churches is not denied by even the most strenuous advocates of Independency. They differ from us, however, as to the form or mode by which this mutual assistance is to be secured. Shall it be perfectly systematized, or left to mere exigencies? Shall it be regulated by fixed principles and determinate rules, as in a written constitution, or shall usage and tradition alone be regarded? Shall the combination of sister churches be such as to require periodical convocations, or shall these be only occasional? Shall the confederacy be of the same churches and their pastors, or shall the membership in every particular instance be determined by the parties seeking counsel? Shall the power and authority of these ecclesiastical bodies be exercised in accordance with constitutional law and with a definite responsibility, or by an evanescent convention, whose existence begins and ends with the occasion that calls them together, and whose responsibility terminates with their existence

* Conf. of Faith, xxv. 5.

as a temporary organization? It is not a question as to the nature of this power. In both connections it is the same. "All church power," we maintain, "whether exercised by the body in general, or in the way of representation by delegated authority, is only ministerial and declarative; that is to say," "the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and manners;" "no church judicatory ought to pretend to make laws to bind the conscience, in virtue of their own authority; and" "all their decisions should be founded on the Word of God." So say our standards. "Their power is wholly moral or spiritual, and that only ministerial and declarative."*

In determining these points of difference, it is well to consult those who have been trained and have passed their lives in New England, under the operation of a system commended so zealously at the present time as "a more excellent way" than our own.

"Synods orderly assembled," say the constructors of the Cambridge platform, in 1648, "and rightly proceeding according to the pattern, Acts xv. we acknowledge as the ordinance of Christ; and though not absolutely necessary to the being, yet many times, through the iniquity of men and perverseness of times, necessary to the well-being, of churches, for the establishment of truth and peace therein."†

"The Consociation of churches," says the famous Richard Mather of Dorchester, Mass., in 1639, "into classes and synods, we hold to be lawful, and in some cases necessary; as, namely, in things that are not peculiar to one church, but common to them all. And likewise when a church is not able to end any matter

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* Form of Govt., i. 7; viii. 2. † Chap. xvi. 1.

which concerns only themselves, then they are to seek for counsel and advice from neighbor churches."*

"All the churches," observes John Cotton of Boston, "the patriarch of New-England," in 1644, "have the liberty of sending their messengers, to debate and determine, in a synod, such matters as do concern them all." Such synods "have power, by the grace of Christ, not only to give light and counsel in matter of truth and practice, but also to command and enjoin the things to be believed and done;" as also "to decree and publish such ordinances as may conduce according to God unto" "reformation."† It is said of Mr. Cotton, that he "would sometimes bewail the deficiency of the churches in New England in this particular;" and that, not long before his decease, he drew up certain "propositions concerning the consociation and communion of churches," which were published in 1675.‡

"We must agree," said Thomas Hooker of Hartford, the patriarch of Connecticut, a short time before his decease, in 1647, "upon constant meetings of ministers, and settle the consociation of churches, or else we are utterly undone."§

The question, "Whether, according to the word of God, there ought to be a Consociation of churches, and what should be the manner of it?" was submitted, by the General Court of Massachusetts, to a Synod convened at Boston in 1662; and, "with a marvellous unanimity, not one elder, nor so much as two brethren in all that reverend assembly, dissenting,"‖ they

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* "Congregational Order," p. 25.

† "Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven," pp. 45, 57, 58.

‡ "The Panoplist," x. 327.

§ "Magnalia Christi Americana," ii. 232.

‖ "The Panoplist," x. 327.

answered the first part of the inquiry in the affirmative. "The churches of Christ," they said, "in this country having so good an opportunity for it, it is meet to be commended to them as their duty thus to consociate."*

Trumbull, the historian of Connecticut, informs us that, at the commencement of the last century, "the state of the churches was lamentable with respect to their general order, government, and discipline;" "that, for the want of a more general and energetic government, many churches ran into confusion; that councils were not sufficient to relieve the aggrieved and restore peace. As there was no general rule for the calling of councils, council was called against council, and opposite results were given upon the same cases, to the reproach of councils and the wounding of religion. Aggrieved churches and brethren were discouraged, as in this way their case seemed to be without remedy. There was no such thing, in this way, as bringing their difficulties to a final issue." "A great majority of the Legislature and clergy in Connecticut were for the association of ministers and the consociation of churches." A synod was convened at Saybrook, in 1708, which "provided for one or more consociations in each county, which should be standing, known, and responsible tribunals, with appellate and final jurisdiction."† The design of the framers of the Saybrook Platform was, "to prevent picked councils, *ex parte* councils, and councils upon councils which should give contradictory results and plunge the churches into deeper troubles."‡ The plan of confederation went into very general use; and, after it "had time to operate, the churches became more

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* "Magnalia," ii. 257. † "Complete History of Connecticut," i. 507.
‡ "Congregational Order," pp. 34, 35.

regular and harmonious in their discipline, enjoyed more general peace, and their numbers constantly increased."*

At the expiration of more than a century, during which period the churches of Massachusetts had passed through a sea of troubles, and had been repeatedly distracted and rent asunder by internal commotions, attention was again turned to the consociation of the churches. In an elaborate report, made in 1815, to the General Association, by such men as the Rev. Drs. Morse, Worcester, Woods, Austin, Lyman, and Cooley, reference is made to the counsel of their early divines, and it is affirmed that "the consequences of disregarding this sound advice have been witnessed in the state of the churches in Massachusetts for a century past, and are apparent in their present state." "So distracted," they say, "is the state of our ecclesiastical affairs, and so vague and loose and weak the principle of union, that churches in our fellowship may go to the greatest length of apostasy, without any inspection, and without losing that indefinite fellowship with us which they before enjoyed." "There is no explicit acknowledgment of mutual responsibility, and no definite intelligible statement of reciprocal rights and duties, or of the method of intercourse." "We are under a kind of necessity of allowing our disorderly members to call in churches the most defective in Christian character, to censure our principles, to overturn our internal discipline, to sanction disorder and heresy, and to attack the reputation of faithful ministers." "We have no effectual means of keeping corrupt or incompetent men from entering into the ministry and obtaining ordination. A corrupt church,

* Trumbull, ii. 17.

with a heretical minister, has opportunity to exert a corrupting influence upon the whole body of Congregational churches. The great evil here complained of is at present protected and suffered to spread, without any effort for its cure." "We have no regular, acknowledged, and uniform method of trying a minister for any violation of the laws of Christ."

The only remedy provided by the system, for the removal of these evils, is the calling of occasional councils, by mutual choice, or by an aggrieved party. Of mutual councils, Dr. Morse and his associates say, "Such occasional, transient bodies, however useful they may sometimes be in composing particular disturbances, can afford no regular and permanent support to the friends of religious order or do any thing effectually to restrain offenders. Mutual councils, in present circumstances, may be evaded. Offenders may refuse to join in the choice of them or to submit to their decisions." "Nor is it determined among our churches," they add, "in what cases councils are to be called; nor what is the extent of their jurisdiction, or the authority of their results. Mutual councils, on the present plan, may be multiplied without limits. Difficulties may be so managed that there shall be no end of strife." "Mutual councils, at present, are constituted in a manner extremely unfavorable to impartiality, justice, and unanimity; so that there is but little prospect of a decision which will give satisfaction to the parties. Councils are chosen in a time of contention, when the minds of all concerned are liable to irritation, if not to bitterness. And, what is more, they are chosen by the contending parties; and the offender, however exceptionable his character and however flagrant his crimes, has an equal influence in constituting the tribunal with the other party. Doubt-

less he will make it his object to select men who will be his particular friends and advocates,—not those who will be judicious and impartial." "As circumstances are, it is by no means strange that a trial before a mutual council is frequently nothing but a scene of animosity and strife, in which the parties, aided by two divisions of the council, come forward to contend for victory. The evil here complained of is like that which would be felt by civil society if courts of justice, instead of being permanent bodies, organized in a manner wisely calculated to exclude all injustice and respect of persons, should depend for their existence and continuance on the will of disagreeing parties, and so should, in fact, be the offspring of self-interest, dishonesty, and strife."

"An *ex parte* council," they say, "resorted to as a substitute for a mutual council, is still more exception able. It will, from the very nature of the case, be regarded with suspicion, and can never have the power of terminating a contention. A second *ex parte* council may be called to contravene the decision of the first; and so on without end."*

Not less decided and definite are the objections urged by President Dwight against this whole system. He speaks of "a select council" as "a judicatory most unhappily constituted." "It seems absolutely necessary," he says, "that every ecclesiastical body should have its tribunal of appeals." This tribunal, he thinks, should be "a standing body," "always existing, of acknowledged authority," "a court of record, having a regular system of precedents." And beyond this, he judges, there should be "a still superior tribunal, to receive appeals in cases where they are obviously

* "The Panoplist," xi. 361–368.

necessary."* He vastly preferred the Presbyterian to the Congregational way.

If, at the expiration of nearly two hundred years, during which the New England system had been on trial, its ablest divines, the men of ripest experience, familiar from their childhood with its workings and with its history, most trusted and trustworthy, are constrained thus to deplore its obvious defects and manifest evils, we wonder not that President Edwards, in 1750, should have said, "I have long been perfectly out of conceit of our unsettled, independent, confused way of church government in this land; and the Presbyterian way has ever appeared to me most agreeable to the word of God and the reason and nature of things."†

The testimony of these venerated men applies just as forcibly now, as then, to the system of which they complained. The evils specified are incident to the system. Let error creep into the churches, as in the days of Stoddard and Edwards, or as in the days of Morse and Channing, and what is to hinder the spread of defection from the faith? If a gifted pastor makes an excursion into the regions of speculation, and returns with perverted views of "God in Christ," of the great sacrifice for sin, and of regeneration, who but his own church are to call him to account? And, if they sustain him, who is to expostulate with them, and save the community from the inroads of false doctrine, especially if they proclaim their independence of all superior jurisdiction? Under such a system, who can tell whether a church, or its pastor, is sound in the faith or not, save by direct investigation? Everybody knows what a Presbyterian is. A man, or

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* "Theology," Ser. 162. † "Life," by Dwight, p. 412.

a church, may be Congregationalist, and yet be Arminian, Socinian, or Universalist. The errorist invariably finds our system too unyielding and uncomfortable. He greatly prefers its opposite. When churches or ministers become restive under the wholesome restraints of our ecclesiastical polity, they very readily adopt a system under which they can demand to be let alone and can insist upon the right of believing and teaching as they please.

Ours, we believe, is the more orderly, the "more excellent way." While the particular church retains, and is sustained in, the right of conducting its internal affairs in its own way, subject only to the fundamental law of the confederacy, as in all well-ordered states, the utmost care is taken that the common interests of truth and goodness shall suffer no damage. If the poorest of the flock is aggrieved, provision the most ample and inexpensive is made for redress. From the Session he may appeal to the Presbytery,—a body not created at the will of the parties for the mere occasion, but, like our courts of justice, permanent and responsible. Thence, too, he may go to the Synod and the Assembly, as in civil cases to the Superior and the Supreme Court. The rich may not oppress the poor, nor an overbearing party in the church trample on the weak. The pastor may not, on the one hand, play the despot and set at naught all authority, nor, on the other hand, be crushed by a cruel and cunning despotism on the part of a self-constituted clique of leaders in the church. An effectual shield is furnished in either case. Every wrong may be redressed, every fatal error be arrested, every withered branch removed, without encroachment on inherent rights, or prejudice to the liberties of the people and their pastors.

The purity of the pulpit cannot be too effectually

secured. Ecclesiastical history is, on almost every page, laden with the evils consequent upon the ministry of the ignorant, the weak, the covetous, the crafty, and the unprincipled. Our system aims to keep the pulpit pure. Free to choose, without restraint, their own religious teachers, our churches are yet protected from imbecility and imposition, from heretical pravity and impiety, on the part of those who desire the bishop's office, by the reference of the call to a standing council, (the Presbytery,) whose position and relations give them abundant facilities for testing the gifts, determining the faith, and trying the spirits of candidates for the honors and responsibilities of the pastoral work. The doors of the sanctuary are to be shut against the unworthy, and intruders are to be thrust out. This great end of our ecclesiastical polity has thus far been well attained. When the most baleful errors have pervaded other communions, and when Independency has proved in this respect a failure, our own churches, by the will of God, have been kept pure.

This system of confederated councils, therefore, we maintain, is worthy of all confidence. It is sanctioned by the almost unanimous suffrages of the Christian world, being tacitly adopted even where in theory it is rejected. It is based, moreover, upon those principles of government which underlie every well-ordered political state. It accords admirably with the theory and spirit of our own municipal institutions, and secures all the ends of government, with as few incidental evils as can well be expected in a world of so much selfishness, prejudice, and corruption.

Nor is it the least of its excellencies that it requires us to "go by a book;" that the metes and bounds of our constitutional government are known, recorded on the printed page, and made a matter of covenant;

that nothing is left to conjecture or tradition, but all the essentials of faith, order, and discipline made certain. Scripture is infinitely to be preferred to tradition; written law, to conventional usage. The definite is vastly better than the indefinite,—far less liable to perversion and abuse; more available for all the legitimate ends of government; more conducive to union, concord, strength; and more reliable for the oppressed. We have a book, and we "go by a book;" not the compilation of some self-appointed scribe or annalist, but the work of the whole Church, well digested and heartily adopted. It is one of the felicities of our system, that, when one of our standing councils convenes, the question is not asked, "What is the usage, what the custom?" as in those evanescent Conventions where nothing is fixed, nothing certain. We are not left to the treacherous and varying memories, impulses, whims, fancies, or prejudices of self-constituted leaders, who may choose to put their own interpretation on traditionary forms.

Another distinctive principle of our ecclesiastical polity, and the last to be enumerated, is

IV. A REPRESENTATIVE ADMINISTRATION OF GOVERNMENT.

In all constitutional governments, where the power emanates from the people, the system of delegation prevails. It grows out of the nature of the case. Once only, or but seldom, in the year, can the town assemble in mass for the supervision of their common interests. If a street is to be graded, a road repaired, a ditch dug, a post set, a tree planted, a walk laid, a pond drained, a fence built, the town-house swept, a broken sash repaired, a leak mended, a door re-hung, or a pulley adjusted, must the whole town be called

together? In the administration of justice, in matters of dispute between neighbors, in the adjudication of the claims of the grocer, the baker, the tailor, the hatter, the seamstress, and the milliner, must the whole town be summoned to hear, consider, and determine? Are the nice and intricate questions of civil and criminal law, and every judicial process against a debtor, a pilferer, a forger, a burglar, a midnight brawler, a boxer, a murderer, to be determined in "town meeting"? The most ultra democrat of the land never ventured his reputation on such a theory. All such matters are better intrusted to the hands of a chosen few,—the selectmen, the aldermen, the standing committee, the supervisors. The town must needs act, in a thousand things, by proxy, by representation, by officials. It is the only rational mode. The principle pervades our whole body politic.

Our system of church government herein conforms to the most approved precedents, the dictates of reason, and the Scripture model. We have our selectmen, aldermen, or elders, in every church, chosen by the people from their own number, to administer the discipline, watch at the door, and supervise the affairs of God's house. Whatever may be thought of, what some among us maintain, the divine warrant of the eldership, none can deny, not even the most strenuous advocates of the people's power, or so much as question, the right of any church to adopt, if it suits them best, the representative form in the government of their fraternity. It is clearly at their option to commit so much of the supervision of their community as may be deemed best, into the hands of a session or standing committee. Nothing in God's word forbids it. Congregationalism claims it as an inherent right, to determine in what form church government is to

be administered. It exercises the right in numerous instances. Its churches transact their business, to a great extent, by committees. The standing committee is in effect a session.

The principle prevails more or less in every church "It must often happen," says Dr. Chalmers, "that even under the most democratic economy of a congregation, the minister virtually obtains his office by the appointment of the few, and only with the acquiescence of the many. In every assemblage of human beings, this is the method by which all their proceedings are really carried forward. The ascendency of worth, or talent, or station, or some other natural influence, is ever sure to vest the power of originating with the few, and to leave nothing with the many but the power of a *veto;* nay, even, in many instances, to disarm them of that power."*

The pastor of a Congregational church in the city of New York was asked, not long since, "Have you not ruling elders in your church?" and the instant reply was, "Most certainly." "And is it not so in all your churches?" "Certainly." Such being the inevitable tendency of all democracies, we avail ourselves of the principle. Seeing that, whether officially or unofficially, the power will be exercised, we prefer to make it a responsible power,—to hold the few accountable to the many, by official trust, and so to guard the rights of all most effectually. Nothing is more to be deprecated in any government, civil or ecclesiastical, than irresponsible power, whether exercised by lord bishops or lord brethren.

This delegation of authority implies no sacrifice of equality or liberty. The senator is but a servant.

* "Christian and Civic Economy," i. 236.

The Presbyterian elder, as truly as the Congregational deacon, is but one of the people, chosen to minister in things pertaining to God, for his brethren. This cherished principle of democracy pervades our whole ecclesiastical polity. The pastor is but one of the people. In all our assemblies—sessional, presbyterial, synodical—the popular element is at the least numerically equal with the clerical.

Such an administration greatly relieves the people,—frees them from needless burdens. Why should a whole church be called away from their daily avocations to settle every little dispute or difficulty or adjust every little question of duty or expediency? Or, since it cannot be fully convened save on the Sabbath, why must the holy hours be appropriated to the business of the week? The Christian enters the church not to be a ruler, or a judge; not to be trained for the forum or the bench; but to honor Christ in his ordinances and to advance the kingdom of holiness among men. Freed from the immediate responsibilities and burdens of the ruler and the judge, he is more at liberty to pursue his appropriate work and secure the higher ends of church fellowship.

The prerogative of sitting in judgment on the admission of members to the church is claimed, in some quarters, for all the brethren. Was it so in the beginning? The Church is not a mere voluntary organization, but a divine institution. The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are of Christ. Admission to these sacraments is a holy privilege; exclusion from them, an awfully serious thing. Are the body of the faithful, in any church as ordinarily constituted, young and old, learned and unlearned, experienced or unexperienced, properly qualified to determine such questions? Where in the New Testament does it

appear that the question of admission to the ordinances was, in any case, decided by the suffrages of the brethren already admitted? Is there any such case on the sacred record? Was baptism administered only on the vote of the congregation?

The numerous details of church discipline call for the exercise of the highest wisdom. As in the judiciary, it is safer far to commit the supervision of such affairs to a bench of prudent men, selected with special reference to their fitness for such a work. Great injury is often done to religion by the publicity given to matters of indelicacy that transpire in the trial of scandals before a church. We greatly prefer that such processes should be conducted with as little publicity as the ends of truth require. A participation in the responsibilities of an ecclesiastical tribunal is by no means needful to the Christian's growth. The members of our own churches, we think, show their profiting quite as much as others.

To the pastor of a church the eldership is of incalculable service. Often called to act in circumstances demanding no small amount of caution, prudence, and judgment, on the one hand, or of energy, promptness, and dispatch on the other, he finds in his eldership the very best counsel that the case admits. Many of the pastors of New England have lamented this defect in the policy of their churches. It takes away, in many instances, the temptation, on the part of the pastor, of assuming the responsibility of exercising the people's power without reference or consultation,—of exercising the one-man power.

A distinguished divine of New England* gave expression, one hundred and fifty years ago, to his fore-

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* Rev. Cotton Mather, D.D.

bodings, in these words:—"When churches have some hundreds of souls under their discipline, but the single pastors are not strengthened with consistories of elders, or an agreeable number of wise and good and grave men, chosen to join with the pastor as their president in that part of his work which concerns the well-ruling of the flock, their discipline will by degrees be utterly lost; the grossest offenders will by degrees, and through parties, be scarce to be dealt withal."* A faithful eldership, while it abridges nothing of the just liberties of either pastor or people, is an invaluable blessing to them both and to the Church at large.

For this system, therefore, in view of the principles thus exhibited, we claim a large-hearted and scriptural catholicity; a jealous regard for the rights and principles of its membership, its ministers, and its churches, with the most ample provision for their security and defence; a holy jealousy, also, for the purity in faith and manners, the piety and the power, of the pulpit; with the most effective arrangements for prompt and energetic action on the part of the individual church, and for the utmost combination of the energies of the whole denomination, in the work of publishing the gospel to every creature.

As a system of church order, our ecclesiastical polity is all that we can desire. It is the growth of ages. It is the fruit of a world's experience. Its love for the past blinds it not to the riper fruits of a coming era. Whatever of wisdom can be gained in the future, it may easily and orderly appropriate. Its frame-work is elastic. It provides a safe and ready mode for the incorporation of new forms, and the modifying of the old, at the will of the people. It adapts itself to

* "The Panoplist," x. 324.

every phase of society. It is at home everywhere. It works to a charm in the single church, nor less admirably in the widest expansion of the confederacy of churches. It is fitted peculiarly for the indefinite extension of the Redeemer's kingdom. It may co-operate with other organizations, or pursue the work by itself. It is a voluntary combination of churches, presbyteries, and synods, pledged at God's altar to the high and holy work of promoting the cause of Christ as God shall give them opportunity. It needs no other organism for the work of bringing forward and sustaining its candidates for the ministry, of furnishing the churches with a godly literature, of exploring the waste places, planting new churches and sustaining them in our own land, and, in a word, of instituting and supporting missions wherever man is found, in Christian and in heathen lands. It is a world-converting institution. It needs but the breath from heaven, the living soul, the Spirit's mighty impulses, the heart, the will, to make it all that any system can be.

Pure and scriptural in her faith, regenerate in her membership, served at her altars with a learned and godly ministry, simple in her worship, strict and equal in her discipline, efficient in her government, "beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth," is the Church of our love, the habitation of our God.

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